

October 4

Esther 5-10

Welcome to the October 4th Project 4:4 reading. Today we conclude our time in Esther with chapters 5 - 10 of the Book of Esther. We'll see how the intervention of Esther the Queen and the providence of God worked together to bring deliverance to the Jews scattered throughout the provinces of Persia during the reign of Xerxes the king.

Yesterday we met Mordecai and his niece Esther who after Xerxes deposed his queen, emerged from a kind of Miss Persia pageant, to become the new queen. We also met Haman, an advisor to the king and who hatched a plan to eliminate the Jews in Persia. Mordecai pleads with Esther to approach the king on behalf of her people. Such a request places Esther's life in jeopardy as one is not allowed to approach the king without an invitation. We were left in the balance at the end of chapter 4 with Esther's call to the Jews to fast three days as she prepares to approach the king.

The powerful modern day story of Elisabeth Elliot serves as a striking example of how God applied this very passage of scripture in her life. Her husband Jim was one of the pioneer missionaries who died at the hands of the Auca Indians in Ecuador in the 1950s. She was left behind in a primitive culture which was obviously very dangerous. Her great concern was for her young daughter. Some relatives and friends were advising her to take her child and return to the United States. A South American rain forest was no place to raise a child by yourself. That made a great deal of sense except for the fact that she firmly believed she had been called just as certainly as her martyred husband to bring Christ's life into that primitive place. Should she follow the path of common sense and safety and abandon the call, or should she hang on to her calling and further imperil her child? It was while reading this passage in the Book of Esther that the Spirit of God spoke and told her to stay in Ecuador. The quest for safety is not a sufficient reason for ignoring the calling of God. That is what Mordecai said to Esther. So Elisabeth Elliot embraced the response on the young Jewish queen. I will do what God has called me to, "And if I perish, I perish!"

Today we read about how providence combined with Esther's efforts thwarts the plan of Haman and saves the Jews. Haman ends up hanging from the scaffold erected at his command for Mordecai.

There is a delicious sense of irony in the scene in which the king seeks Haman's advice with regard to how he should honor a trusted servant. In his prideful arrogance, Haman was sure the king had him in mind. Wouldn't you have loved to see the look on his face when King Xerxes told him to go and confer all of those honors upon Mordecai the Jew for whom he had already prepared a gallows!

Now the first and most important point about the chapters we read today is that they record for us the origin of the Jewish feast called Purim. A "pur" is a lot a way of making decisions in Old Testament times much like drawing straws or rolling dice, and suffix "im" is the plural form for Hebrew noun. Haman, we are told, cast a lot for the destruction of the Jews, so "Purim" is literally the feast of "the lots."

The decrees of these ancient kings were irrevocable -- I have never had an opportunity to investigate the logic behind that fact, but I suppose it is connected with the idea that a divine king (some of these rulers were believed to be gods and all were seen as the earthly representatives some national deity) -- a divine king cannot be wrong or make a mistake so there would never be a reason to revoke or change a decree. When Haman is hanged from his own gallows, there is a great sense of relief and of vindication. Justice has been done and the hateful enemy of the Jews is dead. But the decree allowing for the slaughter of the Jews and the appropriation of all of their material goods still stands, and Xerxes himself cannot change it!

We read about a similar situation in the Book of Daniel when King Darius was tricked into issuing an edict which would lead his faithful servant Daniel into a lion's den. Like Darius before him, Xerxes finds himself unable to revoke a decree that he deeply regrets. After yet another plea from his beautiful Hebrew queen, Xerxes gives his signet ring, the sign and seal of his authority to his new chief advisor, the Jew Mordecai, and Mordecai fashions a new edict designed to counter balance and even overturn the first one.

This edict provides the Jews with the opportunity to defend themselves and authorizes them to attack their enemies and to appropriate the properties of any that they are able to vanquish. Because the events which had so recently occurred in Susa were known throughout the empire, and because the new position of Mordecai as second only to the king himself was a very clear signal as to where the sentiments of Xerxes now were known to lie, many who might have attempted to join in Haman's wholesale slaughter of the Jews were frightened away.

The Jews now became the aggressors instead of the defenders and not content to simply defend themselves they went on their own program and killed 75,000 of their enemies on the appointed day. They refrained however from taking plunder from those they had destroyed.

I must confess the desire for vengeance that seems to be reflected not only in the attitudes of the Jews in general but also in Esther and Mordecai is a bit troubling to me. After killing 500 of their greatest enemies in Susa, Esther asks permission to extend the killing for an extra day and for permission to publicly hang the corpses of the ten sons of Haman who had been included in the 500 killed that day. Permission was granted and 300 more casualties were listed the next day. This seems different to me than the sometimes bloody campaigns of Israel in the days of Joshua, for there the destruction was carried out at the command of God as judgment for sins attributed to a whole civilization. This seems much more like revenge to me.

According to chapter 9, the feast of Purim, which is still a part of the annual cycle of feasts celebrated by the Jewish religion, was initiated as a result of the letter which Mordecai sent to the Jews in all the provinces of Persia. "He wrote to them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor." ... "These days," the account continues, "should be remembered and

observed in every generation, by every family, in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never cease to be celebrated by the Jews ..."

Because of this statement that Mordecai recorded these events, many students have concluded that the Book of Esther was written by Mordecai. I'm not sure there is sufficient evidence for us to pass judgment one way or the other.

A few minutes ago I mentioned that though the Jews extracted vengeance upon their enemies, they did not take any plunder -- they did not appropriate the property of their enemies. The reason is probably very closely related to a battle that Israel had fought and won many years before. Haman was an Agagite. That probably means he was a descendent of Agag the Amalekite.

You may remember that King Saul once fought and won a battle with the Amalekites in which God gave a great victory to the Israelites. Agag, the Amalekite king was taken alive, but contrary to God's clear instruction through Samuel the prophet, Agag was spared and again, against the clear command of God much plunder was taken and preserved for Israel. It should have all been destroyed. That was the cause of God's final rejection of King Saul. It came when Samuel denounced Saul with the words, "To obey is better than sacrifice." The kingdom was given to David instead. In that story recounted in I Samuel 15, we have the key to the repeated and emphatic insistence that though in the Book of Esther they killed their enemies, the Jews took no plunder. They were attempting to do right what King Saul had done wrong.

They too were dealing with the Amalekites. They too had been granted victory, but unlike Saul, they would not take the booty for themselves and incur the wrath of the sovereign God.

Thus ends the last Old Testament Book of history.